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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups: Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002

Statement submitted by International Association of Gerontology, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

Never before in the history of mankind have so many people lived so long. This unprecedented achievement is transforming all sectors and institutions of societies worldwide. It is no longer possible to ignore global ageing regardless of whether one views it positively or negatively.

In the next fifty years, the number of older persons will nearly quadruple, growing from about 600 million to almost two billion people. Today, one in every ten persons is 60 years or older. By 2050, one out of every five will be an older person.

The importance and acceptance of this reality was pointed out at the 2003 International Day of Older Persons by the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs warning that: "The inclusion of all, and we stress all, population groups is the key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)..." This view was echoed at the same event by the Poverty Group of the UN Development Programme: "The elderly play a crucial role for achieving the MDGs... The elderly will influence, in a very major way, the outcome of the MDGs by 2015...if we are going to ignore the well-being of the elderly, we will do so at the peril of the MDGs..."

It is critical, therefore, that the profound demographic changes occurring worldwide be given recognition as an essential component of development in general and the achievement of the MDGs, specifically that of poverty reduction. At this time, the MDGs have specific targets for reducing poverty among children and youth; they are silent on the issue of older persons, a group that "that makes up an increasing proportion of the poor in developing countries and countries in transition," as the Economic Commission for Europe noted in 2005, "where older persons are among the poorest and most vulnerable groups."

However, ensuring the participation of older persons in the development process goes beyond poverty reduction. Given the dramatic increase in the numbers of older persons, their involvement in the process itself is crucial. Speaking at the 2003 observance of the UN International Day of Older Persons, the President of the General Assembly said: "It is difficult to imagine how countries may progress if such a significant proportion of the population is not taken into account in the development process." In his remarks at the 2004 International Day of Older Persons, Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared, "The Second World Assembly on Ageing, held in Madrid two years ago, marked a turning point in our thinking. The Assembly recognized ageing as a global phenomenon and supported its inclusion in the international development agenda..."

At the 43rd Session of the Commission for Social Development (14 Feb. 2005), the European Union stated: "The potential for older persons is a powerful basis for future development – enabling society to rely increasingly on the skills, experiences and wisdom of older persons not only to take the lead in their own betterment but also to participate actively in that of society as a whole."

Given the fact that policy makers frequently highlight the necessity of including older persons both as recipients of MDG achievements and as participants in the development process, what impedes action? "Situations of inequality have remained pervasive...and have had direct negative impacts on

disadvantaged and vulnerable sectors and specific groups such as youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, migrants and displaced persons" declared the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs at the 43rd Session of the Commission for Social Development. The Report of the UN Second World Assembly on Ageing points out: "A society for all ages encompasses the goal of providing older persons with the opportunity to continue contributing to society. To work towards this goal, it is necessary to remove whatever excludes or discriminates against them..."

Ultimately it is governments that must act on the commitments made at international conferences to ensure that all their people benefit from development. This was affirmed by the 166 member states attending the Second World Assembly on Ageing in their Political Declaration which acknowledged the role of older persons in future development; recognized the importance of placing ageing in development agendas as well as in strategies for the eradication of poverty and in seeking to achieve full participation in the global economies of all developing countries; and, most importantly, recognized that governments have the primary responsibility for providing leadership on ageing matters.

In closing, the NGO Committee on Ageing stands ready to work with governments and the United Nations community in realizing the commitments made to global ageing populations and ensuring their inclusion in the international development agenda.

Note: Statement endorsed and supported by the Non-Governmental Organization Committee on Ageing.